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ABSTRACT

Emergent and beginning readers demonstrate many predictable behaviors in the kindergarten classroom, yet every child is making sense out of print in his or her own way. The job of the kindergarten teacher is to help each child to continue developing as a reader and writer. Reading and writing materials are accessible and usable throughout a print-rich classroom environment. Children's growth and development in reading and writing can be supported by using a natural learning classroom model (consisting of Demonstration, Participation, Practice/Role Play, and Performance) for organizing the day and planning for groups and individual children. The goal for kindergarten teachers in such classrooms is for their students to become independent readers and writers for a variety of purposes. Such teachers want their children to become self-motivated, self-directed, self-regulated learners within a community of learners. (RS)

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Reading and Writing in a Kindergarten Classroom

by Bobbi Fisher

- Mandy is a reader. She holds a book with ease in her lap and tells the story in her own way, including much of the language of the text that she has memorized from hearing it many times. She looks at the pictures and sometimes at me as she reads. Her story is fluent and her voice expressive.
- Sam is another reader. He has also chosen a favorite book, with a simple, familiar text. He reads slowly, word by word, and his voice often lacks expression. He is focusing on the words in the text.
- Allie is a reader, too. Her reading is supported by the meaning of the story, the flow of the language, the pictures, and what she knows about phonics.
- Taisha is a writer. She has just written a grocery list in the housekeeping area. The paper has four lines of scribble-like writing.
- Joey is a writer, too. He has drawn a picture of his house and primarily written random letters from his name all over the pages. He has labeled house, H. He reads me his story.
- Stefanie is a writer. She uses many conventions of writing. For example, she leaves spaces between words, spells some words conventionally, applies temporary (invented) spelling in others, uses vowels in every word, and starts two of the three sentences with upper case letters (Fisher, 1991).

I have begun this digest with examples of the readers and writers in my kindergarten, because whenever I talk about literacy learning I have to begin with the children and what they can do. When I "kid watch" (Yetta Goodman, 1985) and observe what the children do as they read and write, I notice many predictable behaviors that emergent and beginning readers demonstrate. But I also notice that every child is making sense out of print in his or her unique way. My job as a teacher is to help each of them continue to develop as a reader and writer.

Bobbi Fisher teaches kindergarten at Haynes School in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Therefore, my definition of reading and writing includes the wide and unique range of reading and writing behaviors demonstrated by each child in my classroom. For example, reading might be reading environmental print, looking at the pictures in a book and telling a story, pointing carefully to the print, or beginning to read independently. Writing might be a drawing, scribbling, writing random letters, inventing spelling or beginning to write conventionally. In our classroom, when we refer to reading, the children and I know that we mean using books to create meaning. When we refer to writing, we know that we mean picture drawing and letters and letter-like marks.

The Environment

Our classroom is a print-rich environment. Reading and writing materials are easily accessible for the children to select and use throughout the room.

- Reading. Big books and charts with poems, songs and chants in enlarged text are displayed. Fiction and nonfiction trade books, predictable books, dictionaries, and magazines are available on library display shelves, regular shelves, plastic bins and crates, and on tables throughout the room. A listening table is available, equipped with a tape recorder, earphones, story tapes and multiple copies of the accompanying text.
- Writing. The writing area contains a variety of paper, pencils, markers, crayons, rulers, a stapler, and a date stamp and pad. The alphabet in upper and lower case letters is hung at eye level, and cards with the alphabet and an accompanying picture representing the initial sound of the letter are accessible for the children to use wherever they are writing in the room. A plastic file crate is available in which the children file their daily drawings and writing so we have a record of their growth throughout the year.

Conditions of Learning

"To foster emergent reading and writing in particular, whole language teachers attempt to replicate the strategies parents use successfully to stimulate the acquisition of language and the 'natural' acquisition of literacy" (Weaver, 1990 p. 23). Brian Cambourne lists these conditions of

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learning as Immersion, Demonstration, Engagement, Expectation, Responsibility, Use, Approximation, and Response (Cambourne, 1988). In my classroom I try to create these same conditions to support children's growth and development in reading and writing. I use Don Holdaway's (1979) natural learning classroom model (Demonstration, Participation, Practice/Role Play, and Performance) for organizing the day and planning for groups and individual children.

- Demonstration and Participation. During group time, which I call shared reading, I give many demonstrations of reading and writing, and the children participate in these literacy experiences by reading along, commenting on concepts of print, and discussing the story. We read many different texts, such as predictable big books which support emergent and beginning readers, as well as poems, songs and chants, and fiction and nonfiction trade books. I model, and the children participate by using a variety of strategies that successful readers use, such as reading the sentence again, and using the beginning letter of a word to predict and confirm what it is. We discuss skills in context so the children will be able to use them as needed to create meaning as they read for a variety of purposes. I write in front of the children and they join in and participate, giving suggestions for content and helping spell the words.

All of these demonstrations are whole, meaningful, and authentic (Goodman, 1986). They take place in a noncompetitive atmosphere as each child participates at his or her developmental level. Each child is a member of the literacy club (Smith, 1988).

- Practice/Role Play. Choice time follows shared reading. The children have opportunities to practice what they have observed and engaged in during the group time. I ask the children to read every day, but I give them lots of choices of what to read. They can read big books, small books, trade books, magazines, or charts or listen to a story tape. They can read alone, with a friend, or to a grownup.

I also ask the children to write every day. Usually they can choose their own topic. For example, they can write a book, write with a friend, or write in conjunction with an art project, block building, or the developmental play environment which we have set up in the room. The general writing parameters are flexible: draw a picture, write something (this varies from scribbles to labeling to conventional writing, depending on each child's development), date the piece with a date stamp, and write their name.

During choice time I watch the children and assess what they know so I can help them develop as readers and writers. I listen to them read, or conference with them about their writing. As I get to know them, I am able to encourage learning by taking that teachable moment to support growth.

- Performance. To complete the model, children need opportunities to share what they know. In our classroom sharing takes many forms. Children share their reading by reading to each other or to me and by taking a book home to read to their parents. They share their writing with their peers as they work at the writing table, make a sign for the blocks, or put their piece in the sharing basket for group sharing time. They share with me by coming to show me what they have done, and they share with their parents by taking their work home.

Classroom Goals

My goal for the children in my kindergarten is for them to become independent readers and writers (learners) for a variety of purposes. I want to help each one become a self-motivated, self-directed, self-regulated learner within a community of learners.

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